

Bridge or Barrier: The Impact of Social Media on Engagement for First-generation College Students



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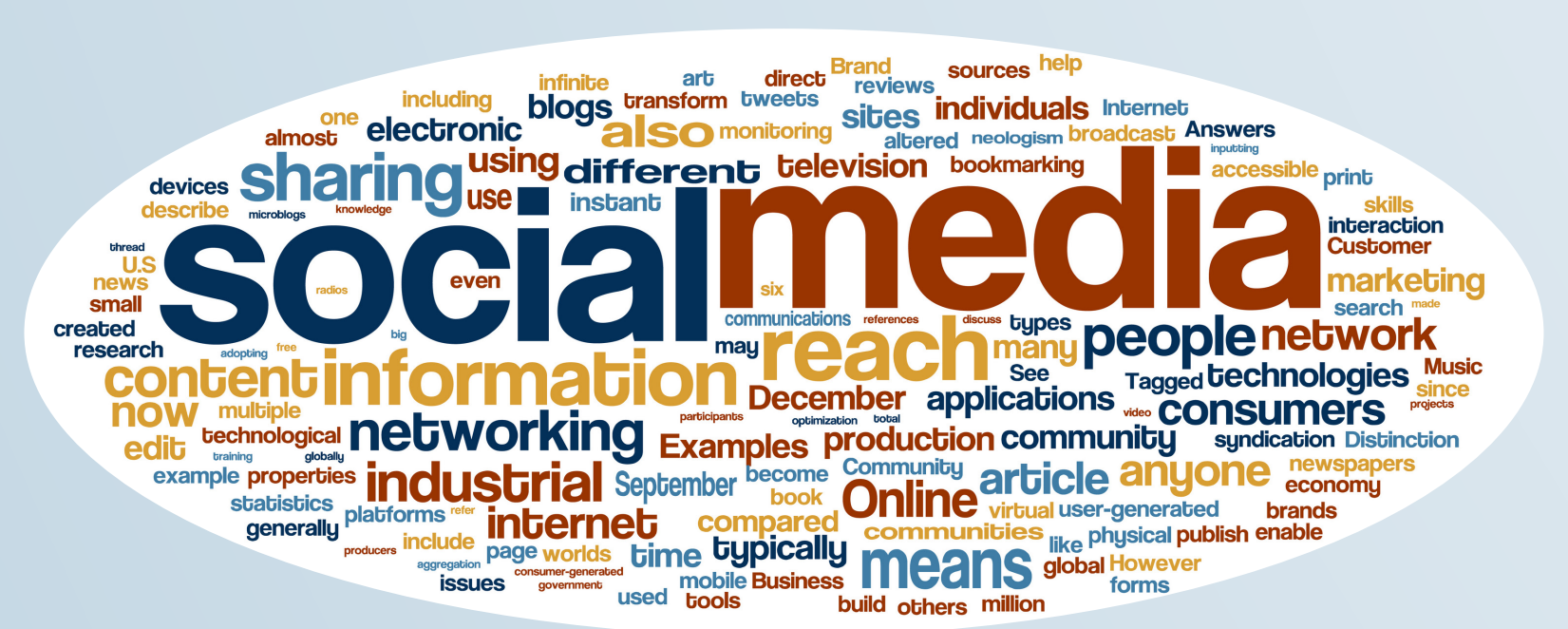
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Abstract

Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are an integrated part of communication for today's college students. This research explores whether this shift in communication with and between students functions to create more connections or whether it functions as another avenue for social reproduction of privilege for first-generation college students.

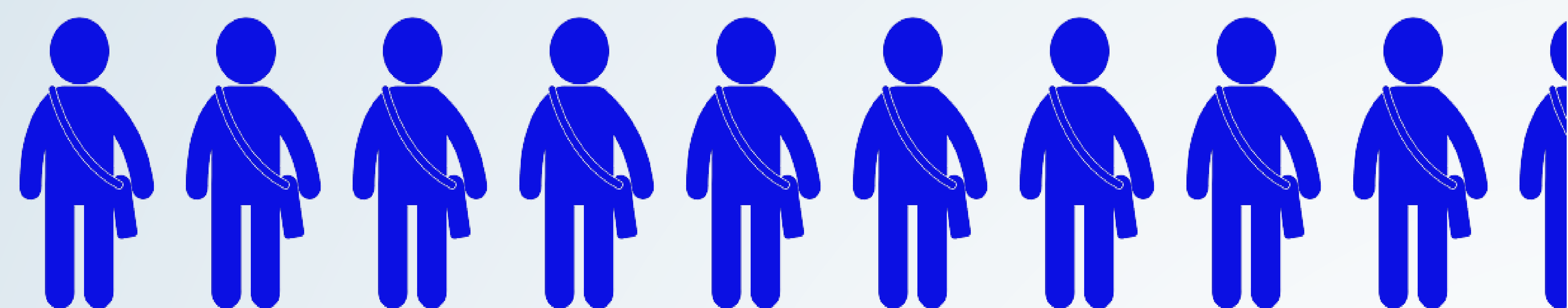
Importance

Without conscious effort to make sure traditionally disadvantaged students are also connected through social media, this technology does not bridge the gap in social capital development in college. By exploring how students are using social media and how this varies by parental education, we will better understand how to use this technology in ways that promote greater equity instead of simply reproducing the same structures of privilege through a new medium.



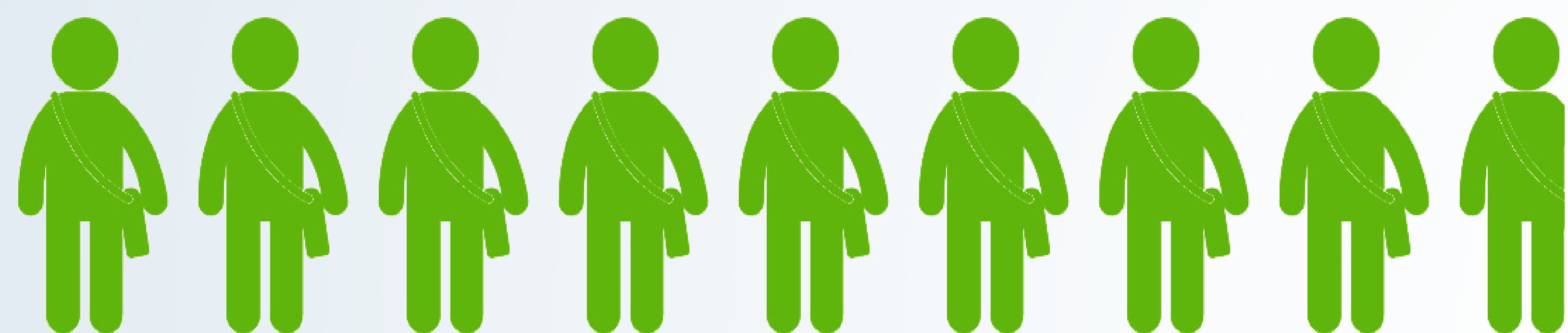
Social media use is significantly related to increased connections with faculty and the quality of relationship with students and staff on campus!

A vast majority of non-first generation students use social media



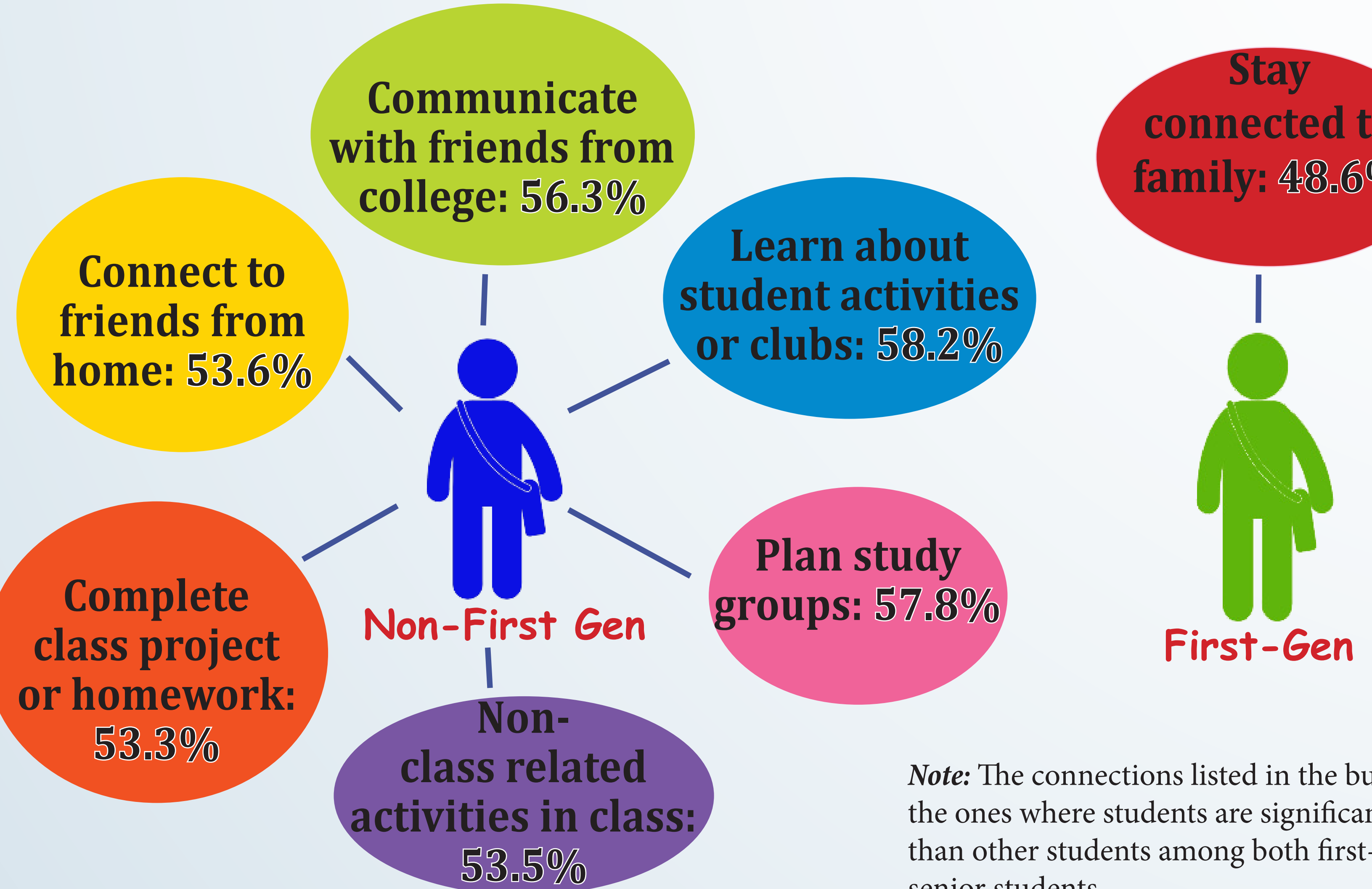
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Slightly fewer first-generation students use social media



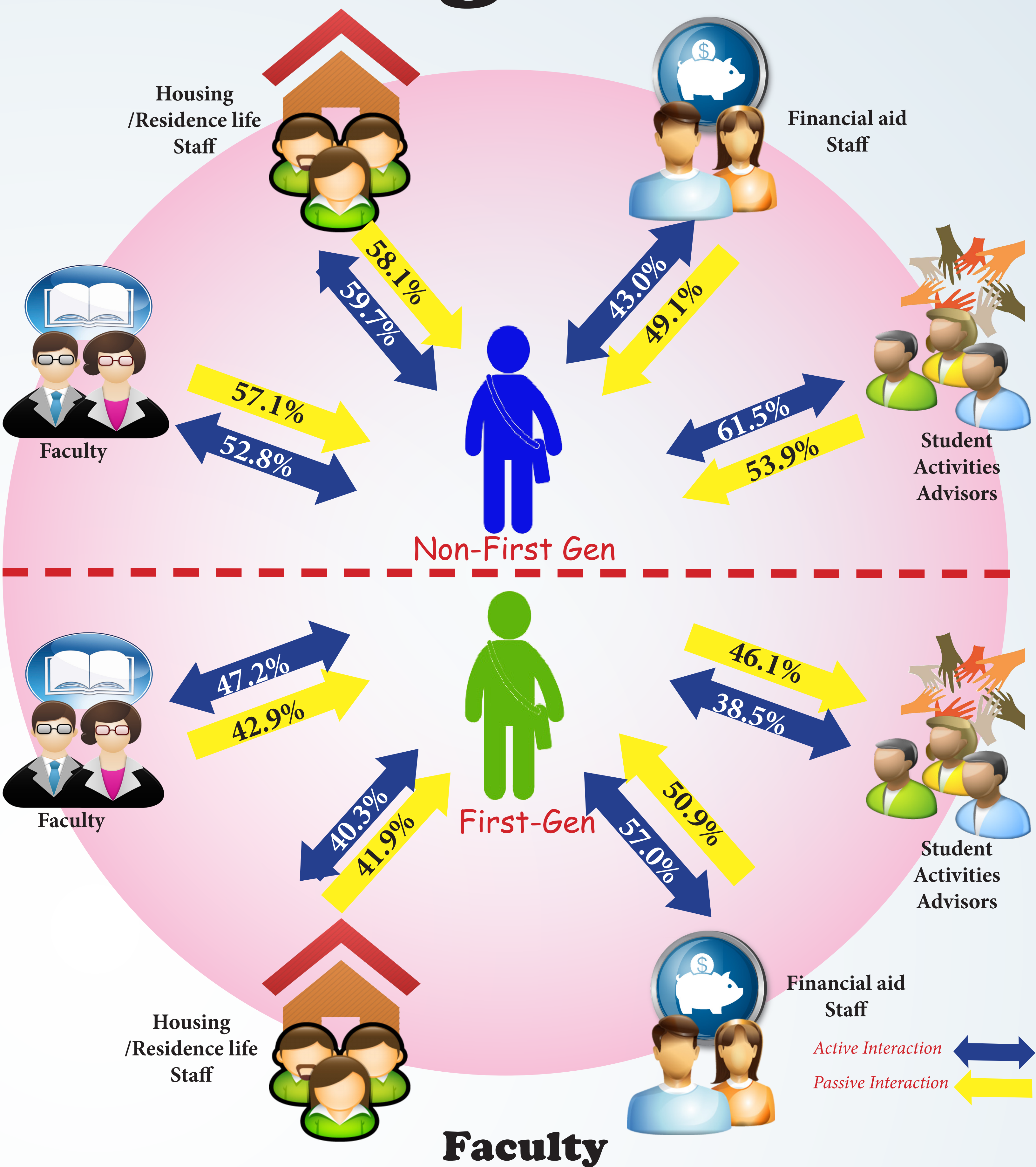
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Students differ in WHO they connect with through social media



Note: The connections listed in the bubbles are the ones where students are significantly higher than other students among both first-year and senior students.

The proliferation of social media on college campuses has created new avenues for students to build and maintain connections to their peers, to faculty, and to staff members. Though this technology creates a new medium for developing social capital in college, this research illustrates that these new media are subject to the same systems of privilege that have traditionally advantaged upper-class students. Though first-generation students only use social media slightly less than their peers, there are significant differences in the types of interactions they are having and the social capital they are building during college. First-generation students are not making the same connections with peers on campus or connecting to information channels to learn about student activities and opportunities.



In their first-year of college, there was no significant difference in the amount of interactions with faculty, but in their senior year, first-generation students less often communicated with faculty. The fact that in their last year of college, first-generation students are not connecting with faculty in the same way is particularly concerning because these are the relationships that could lead to positive letters of recommendation or other connections to possible employment or graduate education opportunities.

Financial Aid Staff

First-generation students communicated with financial advisors more in both their first-year and senior year, in both active and passive communication. This is likely because more first-generation students utilize financial aid and that they have less access to knowledge about the financial aid system through their parents. Though being able to access information about financial aid through social media is of extreme importance during college, these connections are not likely to yield lasting social capital that will help students beyond college.

Student Activities Advisors

First-generation students interacted less with student activities advisors and more often had passive communication. This difference was statistically significant for first-year students. This disparity in connecting with student activities personnel is problematic not only in the capital students are building or not with the actual personnel, but also in the missed information about ways to be involved in student activities that could lead to other social networks and opportunities to build capital. This disparity in interaction may affect students differently throughout their education. Students in their first-year of college may miss out on opportunities that could better connect them to the campus community or build relationships with their peers on campus. Seniors who are not connecting to student activities personnel may be missing opportunities to build networks that could connect them to opportunities and resource beyond college.



Summary of significant findings from OLS Regressions

		Student-faculty interaction	Quality of relationships with peers	Quality of relationships with staff and administrators
Academic peer interaction	FY ^b		.069*	
	SR ^b		.065*	
Interacting with faculty	FY	.306***		
	SR	.239***	-.050*	
Interacting with staff and administrators	FY			.084***
	SY			.091***
Socializing on campus	FY		.263***	
	SR		.171***	

Note: p<.001***, p<.01**, p<.05*

^aThis table presented standardized beta coefficients from three OLS regressions measuring the impact of social media use for first-generation students on student-faculty interaction, relationships with peers, and relationships with staff. The sample is limited to first-generation students. Controls included gender, enrollment, race or ethnicity, age, self-reported grades, transfer, living on campus, major, working, international, distance education, Carnegie classification, and institutional control.

^bFY=First year, SR=Senior